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A data-driven approach to increasing male advocacy at CASA of Monterey County

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Abstract

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is a non-profit organization focused on advocating for abused and neglected children in the foster system. CASA trains and supports community volunteers who become advocates. For every 50 male children there are only 15 male advocates. Those other 35 boys are left with female advocates. More than half of the youth who age out of foster care are incarcerated at some point by their mid-20s. Many boys decline into the world of drugs, violence, even incarceration. Advocates who connect with the male children at a crucial age, establish a bond and resemblance on another level. Male figures help restore life balance, support and reassurance in male children. This project was designed to provide CASA with feedback from men who have been a CASA, in order to better engage men in the community in this very important role. Feedback was gathered on the successes and challenges experienced throughout the CASA process.

Keywords: *C.A.S.A, advocates, foster care, male children, male figures, successes, challenges*

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Agency Description

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is a non-profit organization focused on advocating for abused and neglected children in the foster system. The mission is to train and support community volunteers who become Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) for abused or neglected children in foster care, upholding the children's rights while pursuing a safe and permanent home (CASA, 2018). CASA ensures the children do not get lost in the overburdened legal and social service system or languish in inappropriate group or foster homes. CASA only offers services to those children appointed by the court ages 5 to 21. Currently, CASA serves over 200 kids. In Monterey County, 84.5% are removed for neglect, 8.7% for physical abuse, 4.1% for sexual abuse, and 2.7% for an unknown reason (Kids Data, 2014). CASA provides the youth well-trained advocates. In order to become an advocate, certain requirements must be fulfilled. Such as attending 35 hours of training, screening, and attending court. Volunteers stay with each case until it is closed, and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. Skills, knowledge, and character are essential when advocating for foster children. The agency provides individuals with the opportunity to directly interact with the children on a personal level. Individuals do not enter the children's lives as an attorney, social worker, or a therapist, but simply as an advocate. This is a great responsibility each advocate takes on once they decide to become part of CASA. Advocates become the children's role model figures.

When a child does not have an environment that is safe, stable, and nurturing, they are more likely to end up in the foster care system (Prevention Child Abuse and Neglect, 2019). Many of these children lose everything in a matter of minutes at the moment of removal from the household.

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Children lose their home, personal belongings, and most importantly the people they most care about. After, everyone who comes into their life are strangers. An advocate is one more person who enters their lives but does not leave. Building rapport with the child and showing them they are not alone throughout the process is key. This agency is great at addressing issues of social justice or economic justice in the community. Many of the children who enter the foster system in the area come from a low economic status. The agency makes sure every single child gets an opportunity to request a CASA regardless of their socioeconomic status, background, religion, sexual orientation, family dynamics. Every one of those children has a personal file waiting for someone to advocate for them.

Project Description

The project was designed to provide CASA with feedback from the male advocate population regarding their role as a CASA. A survey was conducted for past and present male advocates. The survey contained questions which provided feedback from the male advocate population regarding their role as a CASA. Past and present male advocates were the participants. The questions gathered feedback on the successes and challenges experienced throughout the CASA process. Including experiences with the Department of Social Services, challenges around the minimum 18-month time commitment, scheduling the time needed to be an advocate, challenges that prevented the continuation of the advocacy, and the support received from the agency's staff. This survey took the form of multiple choice questions including, an open-ended question which encouraged a full, meaningful answer using the advocate's own knowledge and feelings. The survey helped the CASA agency better understand male advocacy successes, challenges and provide feedback in order to better engage men in the community in this very important role.

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Project Justification

CASA has a need for male advocates. For every 50 male children there are only 15 male advocates (CASA, 2018). Those other 35 children are left with female advocates. Female advocates are wonderful and very helpful. However, as male children grow up they seek and need attention from a male figure. Boys growing up without a male figure are more susceptible to emotional distress (Psychological, 2018). Children may fall into depression because they do not have a positive role model to follow and feel completely alone in the system. Common diagnoses of children in foster care include Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Adjustment Disorder, Anxiety Disorders, Depression, Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Factors include the child's genetic composition, coping skills, age, the specifics of what the child experienced, the child's interpretation of that experience, and the number of foster home moves, in addition to other factors (Mbengue, 2016). Children placed in foster care may have difficulty feeling safe. They may have memories or nightmares, re-experiencing their trauma. Children placed in foster care may experience many emotions at once. They may feel sad, helpless, hopeless and unsure of their future. There may self-blame or guilt, as children may hold themselves responsible for breaking up their family. Trust can be very difficult to establish afterwards. Children go through life with no guidance. Role models are crucial to children growing up. A role model provides advice, understands, and encourages a child. When a male child does not have a father figure they tend to fall into the wrong path because they do not receive the guidance needed in crucial times like growing up. Helping a child from an unstable background overcome adversities and succeed as an adult is how an advocate impacts a child's life.

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More than half of the youth who age out of foster care are incarcerated at some point by their mid-20s (PLACEMENT & PERMANENCY, 2016). Many boys decline to the world of drugs, violence, even incarceration. Male figures help restore life balance, support and reassurance with male children. Advocates who connect with the male children at a crucial age, establish a bond and resemblance on another level. This project was implemented to receive as much knowledge and feedback from male advocates. The questions worked as an outlet to receive crucial information, draw conclusions and make important decisions regarding engagement and challenges from the male advocate population in CASA of Monterey. The interests gave an idea on how to engage and better reach male advocates, knowing their stand point and what worked for them. Challenges faced provided insight on failed goals or tasks to now follow through with a different lens. The agency has a big need for male advocates and the ultimate goal is to acquire as many advocates as possible to help guide male children in the system.

Benefits

This project benefit the agency by receiving information never heard of before. The agency can use the valuable information to its benefit. The feedback gathered from male advocates provide insight on the challenges faced throughout the advocacy process. Allowing the agency to know what is working out and what is not for these specific advocates. Receiving insight directly from past and present advocates makes the agency aware of challenges that are not necessarily stated or evident. Increasing advocacy from male volunteers will impact the male children on the waitlist enormously. More boys can potentially have a male role model as a CASA.

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Project Implementation Plan

The strategy used in this project took the form of a survey sent via email. The survey was conducted for past and present male advocates. Contained questions to obtain feedback from the male advocate population regarding their role as a CASA. Past and present male advocates were the participants. The questions were directed to male advocates to receive feedback on challenges throughout the advocacy process. Including experiences with the Department of Social Services, challenges around the minimum 18-month time commitment, challenges around scheduling the time needed to be an advocate, challenges that prevented the continuation of the advocacy, and the support received from the agency's staff. This survey took the form of multiple-choice questions including, an open-ended question which encouraged a full, meaningful answer using the advocate's own knowledge and feelings. The survey helped and will continue to help the CASA agency better understand male advocacy challenges and provide feedback on how to better reach other men to become CASA advocates.

Participants

Past and present CASA advocates participated in this survey. They were selected through the CASA database. About 80 male advocates were selected to participate in the survey. They all received an email asking for their participation and the great benefits CASA will receive from their answers. The participants had to answer the questions with full honesty and knowledge involving the issues. These questions helped understand the challenges they faced that possibly made it an obstacle to continue their role. Once the responds were received, there was a following analysis of the data to gather information about the individuals' stand point.

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Resources

Agency personnel time was an important resource throughout the project. Meeting with the mentor was a guidance resource through the process. It was important to obtain feedback on the questions conducted. And lastly, getting the approval from primary mentor and secondary mentor were also important resources.

Potential Challenges

About 80 emails of male advocates were found in the CASA database. The survey ended up obtaining responses from 23 advocates. Potential challenges in this survey implementation were that many of those advocates did not use the email provided anymore. As well, as others did not reply. This was a challenge because the goal was to gather as many responses as possible. The initial expected responses were 20 and 23 were received which, was a great number to focus the analysis on.

Assessment Plan

The expected outcome from this project was to find out the real challenges male advocates face which in many cases lead them to the termination of their advocacy. As well, as their successes in order to find out what worked for them. Many start strong but throughout the journey leave their role. Obtaining feedback on what worked for them is just as useful. Knowing the challenges faced and successes provide the agency with knowledge on how to address the potential issues and better serve those male advocates throughout the entire process. Further, it was important to look out for a trend in the responses. Data was collected through Survey Monkey. The results were then transferred and analyzed on Excel Spreadsheets to see if there was any evident consistency within the answers. Being aware of that can provide the agency with real life situations in order to move forward by better serving male advocates in CASA of

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Monterey.

Findings and Results of Assessment Process

As a result of the implementation of this project, important and useful data was extracted. The impact on the identified need of male advocates was identified through each of the responses and comments provided. On the question, what was good/ rewarding about being a CASA? 48% of the respondents chose role modeling was very rewarding. This shows the importance and impact of a role model in a child's life. Children have someone by their side and an advocate enjoys being there as well. Respondent 16 provided a comment, "getting feedback from principals, social worker, teachers, foster parents, as well as CASA advocates to devise a plan to meet the needs of all concerned." This shows all the effort that goes into serving a child. A role model looks out for the best for the child. Collaborating with different stakeholders is rewarding because they make a change in a child's life by showing they care about that child's life. For the question, did you experience any challenges with the Department of Social Services? 35% experienced challenges with the Department of Social Services. Respondent 6 provided a comment, "some social workers ...because of their workload..wanted to take the easy way out of dealing with the child..rather than fully supporting the child." This is a challenge that was common among the respondents. Provides the agency with new knowledge about the Department to better prepare future advocates who might encounter similar situations.

For the question, if you experienced challenges due to the time needed to be an advocate, please let us know to what degree. Completing monthly reports seemed to be a popular answer with 60%. Completing monthly reports is a mandatory requirement of a CASA, and many of the respondents are having issues with that. It is important to look deeper into the reason for that. For question, the support I received from the CASA staff was, 74% found the support very

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helpful. This means the agency is doing a good job at supporting the advocates throughout their process.

For question, if no longer a CASA, please check all the reasons which led to the end of your role as a CASA, 15% marked personal issues, 23% time constraint problems, and 77% marked other. The comment section was filled with responses. Respondent 19 answered, “poor organizational transition from training mode to field support.” Other respondents answered that their CASA child aged out of the system. Respondent 15 answered, “child turned around his life immensely – went from self harm/border suicidal and wanting to be a homeless person, to holding two jobs, doing reasonably well in school, more social and having a steady girlfriend. When child reached age 18.5 years, he felt he had progressed sufficiently where he no longer needed a CASA.” This is a great example of how an advocate positively impacts a child’s life. The advocacy ended because of a good reason. The child was able to turn its life around.

For question, if you are not currently a CASA, would you be interested in returning? If so, please include your name and preferred method of contact, in the comment section. If not, please indicate why in the comment section, 43% responded yes, 7% maybe, and 50% no. Respondent 16 replied, “I was assigned two brothers who had older siblings incarcerated or involved in gangs and uncles who taught them how to steal at an early age and a mother unable to cope with it all. The younger had so much pent up anger, he lashed out at everybody. The older smoked pot at school, jumped out a school window, stole a car, and then fled to Mexico.” Respondent 23 said, “once was enough. And it's somewhat frustrating. I had high hopes and big challenges.” And respondent 19 answered, “there was little if any CASA organizational support after completing training.” There seems to be an issue with the support after training. This is evident through the frustration of advocates who do not know how to handle certain situations.

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Which led to challenges as an advocate and has caused them to not want to return.

For the last question, please provide your suggestions on what CASA can do to better engage other male advocates. If you would like to be contacted please provide your name. A very common answer was better outreach. “More outreach. I became a CASA at the urging of my daughter, a social worker in training. I had heard of CASA but I have never seen any promotional or recruiting information anywhere.” Other ones were the concerns of male advocates not having enough time to support a foster child. “Maybe some men are concerned about the time commitment - getting off work to go to court or spending evenings with the CASA child or attending CE. It's all manageable but some may be concerned especially if they are younger.” Advocates take on the responsibility of a CASA when they are 100% sure they will be there for the child by making time to spend with them. Perhaps, it is important to emphasize this during trainings to make sure advocates are fully committed to the important role. Another interesting response was no men in the CASA personnel. “CASA Monterey employees appear to be predominately female. There should be specific efforts to have a more diverse workforce and to recruit and retain male employees.” Men are usually the head of the household so working for a nonprofit organization might not provide enough income to fully sustain a household. Which is a reason why CASA has female employees and no men employees.

Strengths and successes of the survey were the responses received because a response automatically contributes to the feedback that was intended to be gather for the benefit of understanding the advocates challenges and successes. Moreover, the comments provided by respondents were crucial to the outcome of the survey. Direct responses using the participants own feelings and knowledge impact the responses much more.

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Recommendations

The results helped understand male advocates stand point. There is a big need for better engagement from CASA supervisors. For example, “the lack of engagement from my CASA supervisor has surprised me. Practically zero.” The workload of CASA supervisors is big. However, the agency should find a way to better communicate and get involved with the advocates. As well as better organizational support after completing the training. This directly involves the supervisors as well. After training they are left on their own with very difficult cases. Which can become overwhelming for the advocates due to particular circumstances. For example, many advocates experienced challenges with social workers due to the decisions the social workers make regarding each case. Supervisors and advocates should check in with each other to collaborate and guide advocates with the current situations. Therefore, better serve the children which is the ultimate goal. Completing monthly reports seemed to be a big issue. Changing the format of the reports can help raise the amount of reports and enable an advocate to continue the advocacy for a longer period.

Promoting the benefits of becoming an advocate and finding new ways to get the information out in the public can increase male participation. Perhaps, doubling the number of recruitment presentations and increasing the public announcements. Retaining advocates is a huge part as well. Recruiting and retaining advocates are equally important areas. Support from advocate supervisors, program director, and the entire personnel can help retain more advocates in the agency. If more advocates are retained, then more foster boys will have a role model to guide them through life. Those boys will grow up to be prominent member of society, with more opportunities for success and to contribute to themselves, their families, and their community (Aging Out of Foster Care, 2019). And maybe one day those children who were once in foster

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care will return the advocacy and role modeling back to their community.

Conclusion

Personal and professional benefits I gained from this project first of all, were creating a useful survey and going further by analyzing the data to discover what can be improved for the only benefit of the male foster children. Presenting this data to the agency demonstrated collaboration through the ability to share resources, expertise, and responsibility to achieve a common goal. Approaching the data with a critical mind helped extract useful information like seeing if there was a trend within the respondents answers and knowing how to change that data into actions. Advocates in the agency play an important role and CASA is more than willing to help them with anything they may need. This survey provided an overview of what male advocates experience. Benefits of this project include bringing more awareness to those in the program. Knowing one can help increase male advocacy for the benefit of the foster children is a fulfilling rewarding feeling after seeing firsthand what children in the system experience. Future CHHS student interns should expect to encounter a capstone project on their senior year field placement to be life changing. The project should change and benefit the agency in a way in which they leave a memorable mark behind.

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Appendix A: Problem model Graphic

Project Title: Title: A data-driven approach to increasing male advocacy at CASA of Monterey County		
Problem Statement: Lack of male role models among boys in the foster system		
CAUSES TO AGENCY PROBLEM	AGENCY-SPECIFIC “MICRO-LEVEL” PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY PROJECT	CONSEQUENCES TO SOCIETY
Lack of male advocates Less foster boys with male advocates	Foster boys do not have a male role model to guide them in the system	Incarceration Depression/Anxiety Drug/Alcohol Abuse Mental Health
CAUSES/RISK FACTORS TO BROADER HEALTH PROBLEM	BROADER “MACRO-LEVEL” HEALTH/SOCIAL PROBLEM	CONSEQUENCES TO AGENCY
Physical, Emotional, Sexual abuse Poor family structure Parent Drug/ Alcohol abuse	Foster boy youth decline into the world of drugs, violence, even incarceration	Feeling alone Bad behavior Depression/Anxiety

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Appendix B: Final Scope of Work

Scope of Work			
Title: A data-driven approach to increasing male advocacy at CASA of Monterey County			
Project Description: The implementation of this project focused on conducting a survey which provided feedback from the male advocate population regarding their role as a CASA. A survey was conducted for past and present male advocates. The survey contained questions directed to male advocates to receive feedback on challenges and successes throughout the advocacy process. Including experiences with the Department of Social Services, challenges around the minimum 18-month time commitment, scheduling the time needed to be an advocate, challenges that prevented the continuation of the advocacy, and the support received from the agency's staff. This survey took the form of multiple-choice questions including, an open-ended question to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the advocate's own knowledge and feelings.			
Goal: To obtain feedback on successes and challenges from men who have been a CASA, in order to better engage men in the community in this very important role.			
The primary objective of the project: To understand male advocates challenges and successes in order to move forward and provide male children with an advocate in the near future.			
	Activities	Deliverables	Timelines
1	Discussed capstone project ideas with primary, secondary mentor	Final capstone project idea approved	Oct – Nov 2018
2	Gather resources for support in the survey	Create a solid survey	Nov – Dec 2018
3	Conduct a survey to assess male advocate participation	Finalize survey questions and get approval	Nov – Dec 2018
4	Deliver surveys to male advocates' emails	Provide male advocates with a solid survey to obtain useful feedback	Jan- Feb 2019
5	Determined what kind of information will be given in the class	Final approved materials for classes	March 2019
6	Analyze responses one by one	Obtain feedback from survey	March 2019
7	Prepare capstone presentation in selected format	Instructor approval and Dress Rehearsal of capstone	April 19, 2019
8	Final preparation for Capstone Festival	Final Presentation at Capstone Festival	May 16, 2019

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Appendix C: Survey for past and present Male Advocates at CASA of Monterey County

Q1 Approximately, how long have you been or how long were you a CASA?

Q2 What is your age?

21-31

32-41

42-51

52-61

62-71

72 and over

Q3 What was good/ rewarding about being a CASA?

Extremely Very Moderately Fairly

Spending time with child

Introducing them to new experiences

Advocating for them in school/ court

Role Modeling

Other (please specify)

Q4 Did you experience any challenges with the Department of Social Services?

Yes No

Social Workers

Therapists

Other

(If yes, please explain)

Q5 If you experienced challenges due to the time needed to be an advocate, please let us know to what degree

A great deal A lot A moderate amount A little None at all

Having time to spend with child

Completing monthly reports

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Continuing education

Attending court

Other (please specify)

Q6 The support I received from the CASA staff was
Very helpful

Sufficient

Adequate

Inadequate

Disappointing

Other (please specify)

Q7 If no longer a CASA, please check all the reasons which led to the end of your role as a CASA.

Personal issues

Agency personnel connection

Time constraint problems

Issues with other child team members

Other (please specify)

Q8 If you are not currently a CASA, would you be interested in returning? If so, please include your name and preferred method of contact, in the comment section. If not, please indicate why in the comment section.

Yes

Maybe

No

Please specify why.

Q9 Please provide your suggestions on what CASA can do to better engage other male advocates. If you would like to be contacted please provide your name.